

Ende Justifies the Means: Completing the Ultimate Five-Note Challenge

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What happens when the ingredients that usually make music so memorable are taken away. In this article, I offer my account of learning Ende, a piece of music familiar to many recorder players and one which is likely to leave a lasting impression on audiences, visually if not audibly. The article is aimed at recorder players tackling the piece for study or performance, and for anyone interested in the pursuit of memorising music which is, in the best sense, unmemorable.

Ende

Ende was written as an encore for Frans Bruggen in 1981 by Louis Andriessen. He takes the recorder's limited range to its ultimate conclusion, using only those notes which can be obtained with one hand, thus allowing two instruments to be played simultaneously. In fact, Andriessen restricts himself to just five of the 14 notes technically possible. The whole piece, save the final line, is built on a series of oscillating and ever-changing patterns using just three notes played one step apart. For nearly two minutes, this musical deadlock plays out with subtle ebb and flow, tension and release in a battle of nerves between left and right recorder, performer and audience.

The effect is excruciating yet oddly captivating. The exaggerated musical gestures within this confined space and the elements of surprise along the way add to an almost unbearable sense of anticipation, only partly countered by the humorous markers such as "Like a stupid waltz" and "Aggressive little waltz". The final unison line, far from bringing any relief, marks a terrifying climax in a melodramatic scream.

The Ultimate Five-Note Challenge

On first appearance, Ende looks unpromising from the point of view of memorisation: No melody, seemingly random patterns, no obvious landmarks and no obvious place to start. To borrow and adapt Vivian Mercier's summary of Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, Ende is a piece in which nothing happens for two minutes - on two recorders. Certainly, there can be few shorter pieces that pose such challenges.

Shifting Perspective

On closer inspection, however, it was clear that lots was indeed 'happening'. I had been deceived by the flat contours of the melodic line and the apparent rhythmic uniformity. There was plenty of action but it was playing out in miniature detail: An accent here, a missing slur there, a rogue extra beat or, just once, a skipped beat. It was all a matter of perspective; Ende would remain impenetrable unless I could learn to appreciate it on its own, minimalist scale.

An Upbeat Approach

I had heard the piece live and had researched performances on YouTube but only with access to the braille score did I realise the piece starts with an anacrusis rather than on the first beat. Such fundamental shifts in emphasis are rather unsettling. However, this opening figure (namely the opening semiquaver upbeat and first two semiquavers and semiquaver rest of the first 4/16 bar) stood out as my unit of currency by which all else would be measured.

Emerging Patterns

Further investigation revealed that, apart from one rogue bar, the second recorder part follows directly the first, remaining one step apart. This immediately halved my workload! I then set about producing a representation of the piece, grouping every occurrence of this figure, leaving a dash for any variants. Thus:

4 - 3 - 2 - 3 - 3 - 2 - 4 - 4 - 1 - 4 - 4 - .

Noticing that the dashes also represented a consistent pattern which likewise repeated a varying number of times, I wrote out the above in two columns. I labelled the columns E and F (reflecting the upper notes in the recorder 1 part). I numbered their occurrence similarly, thus:

E(4) F(1);
E(3) F(2);
E(2) F(3); etc.

I still wasn't sure this system of rows and columns would hold until the end, but having a piece that could be expressed partly in terms of imagined football results immediately gave this music a narrative, however incongruous! It's worth mentioning that the print edition is more concerned with presenting a concise presentation to avoid impossible page turns than making these patterns obvious. Underlining the patterns in different colours may be a useful alternative for visual learners or

those for whom the visual effect on the page is impenetrable. Of course, Andriessen may never have conceived the piece in two columns (or in any such formulaic terms) though I rather enjoy imagining the adversarial discussion this implies and the theatre it lends to performance.

At this point, the F column adds an extra beat, creating bars of 5/16. The pattern continues:

E(3) F(1);
E(3) F(2);
E(2) F(3) etc.

A similar pattern to the opening but with the first column starting at 3 rather than 4.

The right-hand column now adds yet another beat to make 6/16, our "like a stupid waltz". It also represents a departure from the established pattern: The right-hand column has so far started at one repetition and worked up to three. This time it starts with 2 and reduces to 1. Little twists like this are initially stumbling blocks but once noted, they become important mental signposts.

The next row is a cheeky bar of 3/16 without the crucial semiquaver rest, rather like a musical hiccup (I attributed this to indigestion after the waltz). Thus, we reach almost the halfway point.

More Mutations

From here, column E remains largely constant but column F is further mutated. The F to E dissonance is maintained but now alternates between the two recorders. On instruments that are exactly in tune, this difference is almost imperceptible, but a Hz or two either way or any sloppy finger work will soon give the game away. Using the alternative fingering for E (023) at this point for recorder 2 acts as an additional aide-memoire; the physical memory complementing the conceptual memory. From a memorisation angle, this is a significant landmark which I called letter A.

After this rehearsal letter Andriessen introduces the first of what I think of as "compound" answers with two bars in the F column. The next row is a variation of the first row of letter A with recorder II going down to D for the first time in the piece. It is the only bar where the established relationship between the two recorders is broken. Again, initially disorienting but now another crucial landmark. The next 4 rows have compound answers, but the two-column format still just about holds true.

A short link section leads into the final "angry little waltz" where I put my rehearsal letter B. Letter A to B in my version represents the hardest challenge for memorisation and performance, partly because the mutations occur increasingly quickly. Any hesitation here will not only destroy the build up of tension, but probably result in a fatal break of concentration.

The Ende is Nigh

The final "Angry little waltz" is the easiest section to memorise and is probably a good place to start learning the piece. In performance, I always feel a release of tension at this point; mentally and technically, I feel I can relax just a little. But Musically, the pressure builds to breaking point.

The Devil in the Detail

The element of dialogue and surprise between the two columns is emphasised throughout by accents, staccato dots and the use of slurs. Initially I saw these as extraneous details that could be left until the end, so my first braille score stripped all of these away. Their placing does seem rather arbitrary and they are inconsistently observed in performance. Of course, the extent to which one should accentuate these details is a matter of personal preference but they can certainly add to the spectacle. An interesting result of learning the piece so forensically is that a wrong slur or skipped accent can disrupt concentration with disproportionately catastrophic results. The most effective performances are often those in which the theatre, tension and visual spectacle are given pre-eminence over a faithful reproduction of every musical detail.

Take A Breather

One aspect of playing Ende I found particularly challenging was maintaining the required concentration. Just as the patterns mutate more frequently, I found my practice runs derailed. This was not about memory but about concentration. After a minute or so of snatched, shallow breaths, my brain was crying out for oxygen. Overcoming this physiological challenge unlocked the key to performing Ende. I routinely incorporate up to ten seconds of mental preparation, deep breaths and stillness before playing. During this time I often fast forward through the piece, imagining each sequence as outlined above. From a presentation angle, I find that remaining still and focussed draws in the audience who can share in the drama, even before it starts.

Footnote

I have now performed Ende several times and recorded it on my debut CD of solo works entitled "Echoes of Arcadia", available from www.jamesrisdon.co.uk. Usually after such intense study, pieces are likely to remain available for spontaneous recall but Ende is constantly attempting to evade capture. It has challenged me to find new ways of learning and memorising when the usual rules of melody, structure, texture, harmony and colour no longer apply. Altering my sense of perspective to focus in on minute details was especially helpful, as were the football results.

Ende is available from Ascolta Music Publishing.

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